

Combating Winter SADness in the Workplace: Help Employees Fight SAD – Seasonal Affective Disorder



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By: Alan Strashok, Express Scripts Canada Pharmacy Manager, Atlantic

At the beginning of winter, a pattern can start to emerge in the workplace. A normally upbeat manager becomes withdrawn and quiet. A star employee starts coming in late and forgetting about projects. Tempers flare and previously cohesive teams fall apart and behind on deadlines. These are some of the signs of the “winter blues” in the workplace.

Shifts in weather can affect our mood with dull, rainy days bringing us down and sunny skies energizing us. These shifts in mood are temporary and don’t affect our ability to cope with daily life. But our long, dark winters can have an outsized effect on people who are vulnerable to a type of winter-onset depression called “Seasonal Affective Disorder,” or SAD. [According to the Canadian Psychological Association](#) approximately 15 percent of Canadians will report at least a mild case of SAD in their lifetime, while 2 to 3 percent will report serious cases. For this subset of the population, the shortening of days in autumn and winter is the beginning of a clinical depression that can last until spring and be debilitating unless treated.

Impact on the body clock

The causes of SAD aren’t yet known but researchers believe that circadian rhythms (the body’s internal clock), along with melatonin and serotonin levels, play a role. Our bodies are designed to be active in daylight and passive at night. We have receptors in the hypothalamus that detect sunlight, causing the body to produce serotonin, a neurotransmitter that makes us alert and energetic. Likewise receptors tell us when it is dark, triggering the production of another neurotransmitter called melatonin, which induces sleep. Darker mornings make it more difficult to wake up, causing disruption to the body clock, which boosts production of the sleep hormone melatonin while reducing serotonin levels. All of this impacts mood, appetite and sleep. Studies have linked a lack of sunlight to low levels of serotonin, which results in feelings of depression.

The problem with Canadian winters is that the days are unusually short – less than nine hours of daylight in December compared to more than 15 hours in June. The farther north you go, the bigger the daylight gap between summer and winter, rendering workers in cities like Edmonton and Yellowknife particularly susceptible to the condition. Fortunately, there are lots of ways to combat the effects of SAD and assist employees with coping strategies.

Learn to recognize the signs of SAD

It starts with employers and managers learning to recognize the common winter-onset SAD symptoms.

- lethargy;
- irritability;
- difficulty concentrating;
- decline in productivity;
- difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping;
- craving sweets and starches;
- weight gain;
- increasing disinterest;
- feelings of hopelessness or despair; and
- avoidance of social events

All are markers of the condition. It's most noticeable when a person's normal habits and demeanour change to make them less outgoing.

“Supporting employees starts with increasing awareness about SAD and mental health in general. Managers should discourage disparaging remarks and labels and encourage respect for all. Share knowledge that breaks down stereotypes, offer mental health first aid training, and information on where to get help,” said Stéphanie Myner-Nham, Director of Human Resources and Corporate Services for Express Scripts Canada.

“This can be done either through the intranet or by creating posters and a pamphlet that can be distributed at the start of the winter season. Establish a patient and accepting atmosphere to prompt openness.”

Myner-Nham adds that employers and managers should be available to staff struggling with mental health issues, as well as co-workers having difficulty working with them.

“Above all, let others know that mental health is not a taboo subject and work to normalize conversations about mental health in the workplace,” she said.

Here are some more ideas for supporting employees during the SAD season:

Host social events. After work drinks or outdoor patio gatherings decline as the weather changes, and most of the winter is spent indoors in darker quarters with less daylight. To help combat the isolation that this time of year can cause, organize daytime social gatherings that will bring people together, lighten the mood and show employees they are appreciated. A series of daily classes or lunch-and-learns can boost positivity and give employees something to look forward to. A book club could help refocus the mind, and a yoga or meditation class can build resilience and be a permanent ongoing event year-round. If appropriate, increase the dialogue around SAD at a gathering so everyone is aware that the company believes it is a serious issue.

Sponsor exercise sessions. Since the outdoors can be off limits, make up for the lack of physical activity by introducing some light exercise events. Exercise naturally releases endorphins and stimulates the release of dopamine and serotonin; all neurotransmitters that naturally boost and regulate mood. Encourage staff to take an

outside break or establish a lunch hour walking club. If possible, offer flexible hours in winter.

Increase natural light in the office. Midday sunshine can induce feelings of happiness, so raise the blinds, open the curtains, and reduce the number of walls and separators that block natural light from filtering through. If you are able to, encourage employees to move their workstations, or sit in different stations so they can shift to brighter spots on a regular basis.

Provide healthier food and exercise options. SAD can increase cravings for sweets and junk food, so be mindful of this when planning staff snacks or meals. [According to Judith Wurtman](#), former scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and co-author of [The Serotonin Power Diet](#), eating carbohydrates helps depressed folks feel better because the carbs spark an instant serotonin spike. That happiness is short-lived, however, as serotonin levels drop shortly thereafter. The solution? Instead of pasta, opt for starchy vegetables like sweet potatoes and squash. They're just as comforting as pasta but come packed with vitamins, minerals, and fibre.

Get a light box. Employers can promote charities and other organizations that offer assistance with SAD and suggest places where employees can purchase a portable [light therapy box](#) for year round sunshine. This information could be posted or collected into a light therapy guide that is distributed to employees at the beginning of the autumn and winter season. This would help raise awareness of the coming season, which could lead to employees speaking up about their issues to seek help and advice.

Promote the EAP. A lot of people assume that EAPs offer counselling and not much more, but plans have become more diverse in their offerings and include all kinds of resources and services.

Clinical treatments for SAD

Symptoms of SAD can be treated in a number of ways, ranging from non-medical to medical methods.

Treatment for SAD is usually phototherapy sessions to compensate for the lack of daylight, though this can be self-administered with a desktop light box. Having a conversation with a pharmacist or doctor can help.

Here are some examples of other treatments that can be suggested to employees:

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. CBT has been shown to greatly reduce symptoms of SAD and, [according to one study](#), outperforms light therapy by offering [longer lasting relief from depression](#).

Counselling. This might be available through the company EAP, but if not, counselling might be covered through a referral from the employee's family doctor.

Anti-depressants. In more serious cases, a family doctor might recommend trying out medication during the winter months. For people with depression, pharmacists can be an invaluable first line of support, education and information. There are a variety of antidepressant drug classes available to choose from which provide subtle differences from one another in effect. The drug treatment must be selected specifically for a particular patient to treat the illness based on which symptoms from depression are most bothersome to the patient.

Dietary supplements. Taking Vitamin D in the winter months can also help; consult a pharmacist who can recommend the best option and dosage.

About the Author:

Alan Strashok has over 20 years' experience as a pharmacist and currently practices in Atlantic Canada. Alan has been with [Express Scripts Canada](#) for six years.